

‘There was none high or low with God. All were alike to him. Never entertain the thought that I am high born and my neighbour is low of birth. The Ganga is not polluted nor is the wind tainted nor the earth rendered untouchable, because the low born and high born bathe in the one, or breathe the other, or move on the back of the third’.

—Dnyaneshwar

THE WANDERING SAINT

Life and Teachings of Gadge Baba

Vasant Shirwadkar

Foreword by Mr. Y. B. Chavan

SHREE GADGE BABA PRAKASHAN SAMITI

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Foreword

Last two years Maharashtra has celebrated the birth centenary of Saint Gadge Baba. This was the celebratoin in which almost all the villages, towns and big cities including Bombay participated on a massive scale. The name of Gadge Baba was a word of magic to the rural masses. He was not a miracle man, but a man given to the service of the people. As the author of the book says, "He never claimed himself to be a godman or a miraculous healer of human ailments. His approach to human problems was assiduously rationalistic, for he was a saint who was a social reformer to the core and a servant of the people in action."

Meharashtra has a tradition of such saints and social reformers for the last meny centuries. Gadge Baba truly carried forward the greet tradition of Saint Tukaram and Eknath. This smell book is the life sketch of Gadge Baba giving details of his early life and other achievements in the field of social service. Gadge Baba had followers and admirers in all sections of people. Wherever he went large crowds gathered to listen to his simple but forceful preachings. Large number of schools, colleges, boarding houses started in his name are a proof of his interest in the cause of education and health of the people. Gadge Baba belongs to that great galaxy of saints and sages of India who profoundly not only influenced but enlightened the

lives of millions of people all over the country with his soul stirring 'Bhajans' and ennobling discourses

Life of such a man must be known to the people of coming generations so that his life mission will be carried forward. This book, I am glad to say, attempts with success to give some idea of the message of this man and his great contribution in the field of religious and social service. Though intended primarily for serious reading, the book should be also of great interest to students in schools and colleges as well as to the workers and organisers at all levels both in the rural and urban areas of our vast country.

Y B Chavan

*To the memory of
Dr. B. R. Ambedkar
who had great admiration
and love for
Gadga Baba*

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INTRODUCTION

This book is not intended to be a biography of Gadge Baba, for, so rich and eventful a life as Gadge Baba's, packed with countless incidents and episodes and coursed through a wandering career extending over a half century, will make his biography at least five times as big as the size of this book. What I have attempted here, is an essay, a monograph if I can say so, delineating only in broad outlines the story of Gadge Baba's life and his work, and I have only a limited object to serve in providing a glimpse of this unique personality chiefly to non-Marathi readers. Accordingly, I have not strictly adhered to a chronological order of events in Gadge Baba's life but mentioned them as and when they suit the narrative.

In narrating the story of Gadge Baba's life, I have been all the while conscious that I should not let an impression to gain ground that he was a super man. For me it was sort of a psychological problem, which, I am afraid, any prospective biographer of Gadge Baba must face. The problem does not arise out of Gadge Baba's life itself, when it is understood in its proper perspective, but from the attitude of people towards men who might possess some extra-ordinary faculties of mind as Gadge Baba did. In India's long history there was never

perhaps a period which had not its crop of so-called godmen, who flaunt before people as their spiritual saviours. Lord Krishna gave his reassuring message to the world in the *Bhagwadgeeta*, which reads as

Whenever the religion is at a low ebb
And immorality is rife,
To protect the virtuous,
To destroy the sinners
And to establish a new faith
I take birth from age to age

Whether Lord Krishna kept his promise or not is another matter. But his edifying words certainly gave a cue to many pretenders, in all ages of course, to unleash their 'spiritual' adventures on an unwary people. They flourish in their profession because people want to believe them. This credulousness is a typical Indian attitude, fostered by a long tradition. It is an end product of a very complex religious and social situation prevailing in this country at all the times. I do not propose to go into its causes here but suffice it to say that it persists all the same. Even today when science promises to illumine every dark corner of our material and mental life, we have in our country a luxuriant growth of *gurus*, *maharshis* and *acharyas* and of late they have become our best exportable commodity like the Indian tea or jute.

The saints and visionaries of the past, like Dnyaneshwar and Tukaram, never claimed for themselves any supernatural powers. In fact, they had set for themselves the task of freeing human mind from the cobwebs of occultism and asceticism and their fervent advice to people was to live a normal life and to do their duties by their family and society. But men who came after them weaved around them a network of myths and miracles, which are the very antithesis of their teachings. The stories of their miraculous powers are interesting enough to make excellent literature for children and they have a fine moral to teach as well. For instance, a story is told of the encounter between Changdev and Dnyaneshwar with a sanguine moral attached to it. Changdev was bursting with ego for his great ascetic powers (*yoga*) and once riding on a tiger and with a serpent for a whip he went to meet Dnyaneshwar, the upholder of the ideal of devotional love (*bhakti*). When Changdev came, Dnyaneshwar was basking in the sun perched on a parapet wall with his sister and two brothers. Seeing the great *yogi* coming, Dnyaneshwar went to greet him, making the very wall on which he was sitting propel in the direction of the revered guest. The moral of the story is clear enough. If Changdev's ascetic powers of *yoga* could tame and control wild, ferocious

beasts, the *bhakti* of Dnyaneshwar went even further in putting life into an inanimate thing like a stone wall. But in all such stories the people always missed the moral and glorified the miracle giving rise to a dense shroud of credulity over reality which sustained through centuries.

It is not surprising, therefore, if Gadge Baba was also a victim of this kind of miracle mongering. It is to be regretted that some of his most devout followers and admirers — and they were not few — wanted to believe in his alleged miraculous powers. The most popular miracle he was credited with, was invisibility. It was alleged, for instance, that after his *kirtan* was over he dissolved his body into air and disappeared, which was nothing but a perverted view of the fact that to avoid people touching his feet in an uncalled-for reverence he just bolted out of the throng and kept himself in hiding for a while. It was again alleged that he could become invisible and travel over long distances in a matter of seconds. If in one moment he was in Amravati, in the next he would be in Nasik, a distance of over three hundred miles ! It was also said that he could be present at four to five distant places at one and the same time. His ability to move fast was obviously at the basis of this belief but it was an utterly nonsensical distortion. It was indeed an insult to the energy and vigour

nature had gifted him, but those who wanted to believe in miracles would not mind it.

On his part Gadge Baba never missed an opportunity to ridicule such beliefs in occult powers. He once said, "If a person can destroy men by black magic or fetish, why, his rank is over that of God ! To win wars, you have only to release half a dozen black magicians on the battle ground. All the rifles, guns and bombs will then be useless and should be drowned to the bottom of the sea.

"Miracles ! They say that a certain man all of a sudden disappeared and was seen at four different places at the same time. Brothers, could it ever be possible? This is all trash and nonsense. Don't believe in such drain-water gossip. Our mythologies are replete with miracles but we have to separate the grain from the chaff.

"Man himself is a great miracle ! How is it the farmer, who harvests gold in the form of food from the land, has have to starve? This indeed is the strangest miracle ! You have to go to the root of it and discard whatever is unwholesome. Or should you be instead indulging in idle gossiping that this man evaporated or that one was seen at ten different places at the same time?"

It is not so much of a surprise, although it is not less regrettable, if uneducated and illiterate

people believed in miracles. But it comes as a shock to see educated persons equally vulnerable to miracle mongering. You come across to your dismay many highly educated persons who wax eloquent on the miracles their *gurus* work. It is these people who offer themselves as guinea pigs for the exploits of the so called masters and *maharshis*. I must sound a note of warning here that there was nothing abstruse or recondite in Gadge Baba's thinking and that he was not a performer of miracles and wonders and never claimed to be one. It will be therefore a grave error to look to him as a divinity or a spiritual healer. He was a plain thinker who offered practical remedies for the social ills. Could there be anything more material and more tangible than the broom which he made his symbol of manual labour and service?

One thing that stands out prominently in Gadge Baba's life is that he was a relentless wanderer. He rarely stayed at one place more than a week or two and his itineraries show that *most of the time* he moved from day to day. What was the purpose of his wanderings? Why did he take to it with such a zeal and constancy? Was he a vagrant, a tramp, who took delight in going to new places and seeing new faces? He certainly loved wandering but his object was to meet people, talk to them,

enlighten them on the various social and cultural problems they faced and suggest them solutions which he had found after considerable thinking and mature experience. He was an unlettered man and could not reach people through writings or books or through the medium of the press. In fact, these media were ineffective and useless as the people with whom he had to deal with were an illiterate mass. He, therefore, chose to meet them in person, which he did in a manner and on a magnitude that is amazing. It makes an exciting story which I propose to narrate in the following pages.

As a social reformer, Gadge Baba is only next to Jotiba Phule, the doyen of social reforms in Maharashtra. Gadge Baba's sphere of activity was even larger than Phule's, for, for propogating his ideas he moved through the entire length and breadth of Maharashtra and set up his institutions in all its parts. His success with the masses was in no small measure due to his charismatic personality, rendered all the more colourful by his most unusual attires, and his histrionic talents. His *kirtan* was a dramatic performance which used to be a lively dialogue between him and his audiences. It might sound a contradiction in terms but is nonetheless true that an unlettered man he was the most accomplished man of letters. For,

he could infuse in his words a force and a magic that are the higher attributes of the art of literature

There are two major works on Gadge Baba in Marathi, one by the late Prabhodhankar K. S. Thakare and the other by Mr. G. N. Dandekar. I acknowledge my debt, with a sense of gratitude, to the two biographers, for, the source of my narrative is mainly drawn from their books.

It was indeed a great pleasure for me to narrate the story of this unique man, whom I love and admire and whose services to the people I value as most exemplary. I sincerely thank the Gadge Maharaj Mission for availing me this opportunity to write this story of Gadge Baba and publishing the book in such a nice manner. I also thank Mr. Sudhakar Samant for supplying certain information which I have incorporated in my narrative. My thanks are also due to Mr. Shirish Shirsekar for the excellent cover design he has made for the book and Mr. K. N. Potdar for preparing the press copy.

I will be failing in my duty if I don't express my gratitude to Mr. Y. B. Chavan for readily agreeing to contribute his foreword to the book,

-Y. S.



not look for his god in the shrines or temples but in the hearts of the suffering humanity. This saint was Gadge Baba

His real name, the one which his parents gave him, was Debuji. He was humble by birth, for his father was only a village washerman. His native place, Shenggaon is a small village in Daryapur *tehsil* of Amravati district. Amravati is one of the four districts of Varhad, constituting the southern half of Vidarbha, which in turn is a part of the larger Maharashtra state. The language spoken by the people in Varhad is Varhadi, a major dialect of Marathi which people speak with rolling accents and it has a force and a mellowness all its own. Drained by the river Purna and its tributaries, Varhad has a rich alluvial soil, known as the 'black cotton soil'. Cotton is the staple crop of this tract, jowar following next to it.

Shenggaon is situated in almost a flat plane which slopes down from the Satpuda range, some fifty miles away in the north. The river Bhulawari flows by its side, with a cluster of mango groves and vault-crowned tamarind trees grown on its curved banks. In Debuji's childhood days Shenggaon was like any other village in this part of the country, drab and dusty and steeped in backwardness. The villag-

ers were mostly farmers, with a few families of washermen amidst them. Debuji's father Zingraji, besides being a washerman, was also a farmer. He had inherited some six acres of good, fertile land from his uncle and the family lived comfortably on Zingraji's twin occupation of clothes washing and farming.

Zingraji was married to Sakhubai, daughter of Hambirrao Kolaskar of Dapure, a village in the neighbourhood of Shengaoon. Hambirrao, also a washerman by birth, was a substantial farmer, for he owned about fifty acres of land and a large herd of cattle.

The days immediately after their marriage were happy and joyful for Zingraji and Sakhubai. A social custom among the rural people was that for a woman to bear a child the gods had to be propitiated by offering a goat in sacrifice and friends and relatives entertained at a party when the guests were served with drinks and the flesh of the sacrificial goat. Following this practice, Zingraji held a big feast for the villagers, when liquor flowed copiously. This proved a turning point in Zingraji's life, for he tasted liquor for the first time in life which later was to destroy him completely. Sakhubai first gave birth to a daughter, but the child died soon after the birth. Zingraji thought this was a curse of god.

and he repeated making bloody sacrifices to appease the wrath of god, followed by heavy drinking bouts. Ere long he turned an incorrigible drunkard and lost all interest in his work. He squandered away his earnings on boozing and brought his family on the verge of starvation. His old mother and his wife Sakhu would often implore him to keep away from drinking and he would swear to them that from that very moment he had given it up. But his resolution did not last even for a day and he would again relapse into booze. He was not really a bad man but a helpless victim of his vice.

Sakhubai gave birth to a child for the second time. It was a son and was named Debu. He was born on 23rd February 1876. It could have been an occasion of great rejoicing for the parents but there was hardly left anything in the house to rejoice. Zingraji by now had lost his lands and his house and was reduced to the state of a pauper. He had sold all his household effects down to the cooking pan. A depraved man, he now often beat his wife if she resisted his selling away things in the house to buy a drink. A day came when Zingraji, his wife and his young son Debu, were thrown on the road, with nothing on them except their tattered clothes.

They wandered to the village Kotegaon, on the opposite bank of the river Bhulawari, where a cousin of Zingraji took pity on them and gave them a temporary shelter. Addiction to liquor had irreparably ruined Zingraji's health. He was suffering from an acute disease of the lungs to which he eventually succumbed. Before he died he felt pangs of remorse and he said to Sakhubai 'I am a ruined man. Drinking utterly destroyed me and I have heaped miseries on you and young Debu. My friends and relatives who enjoyed at my cost deserted me in my calamity and I am left to die in a stranger's house. My sacrifices to god have proved in vain, for there could be no god who needs to be appeased. Now I have one thing to tell you Let not Debu go after this business of gods and keep him away from drinking'.

In Zingraji's death, the fate had dealt a cruel blow to Sakhubai. The future was completely blank before her. Her anxiety was more for her little son than for her ownself. He had the whole life before him and now what could he do when they had lost all the moorings? In her sorrow for her husband's death, this question was gnawing at her mind.

When the news of Zingraji's death reached Hambirrao at Dapure, he immediately sent his son Chandrabhan—Sakhubai's younger brother

wake up with the first crowing of the cock, grind the grains in the grindstone, clean the house and the cattleshed, attend to the cattle, milk the cows, do the cooking, serve the food to the diners, so on and so forth. After these morning chores were over, she would proceed to the farm outside the village and help the men there in the farm work. As much of the toil and labour was taken off her shoulders, Koutika ceased to feel a grudge for Sakhu. On the contrary she started depending on her more and more and even consulted her in the family affairs.

Sakhu thus fully established her utility and even indispensibility for the family. Not she alone. She likewise made Debu to work hard and do everything he was asked to do. A man was hired for cattle-herding. Sakhu persuaded her father to assign this job to Debu as his share in the earnings of the family. Debu was only too glad to take the cattle for grazing for he imagined it had many fascinating possibilities.

Debu woke up with his mother in the early hours of dawn, helped her on the grindstone, untied the cattle in the cattleshd, collected them and with the first glimmer in the eastern sky he was off to the grazing pastures a few miles away from the village skirting the Purna river. Dehu took to this work as fish take to

pulous care and tenderness, for he loved them as his kith and kin. He saw that each one of them was fed well. He washed them in the river so clean that not a speck of dust remained on their skin.

By dusk Debu would drive the cattle home. Soon after his night meal he would go and join the *bhajan* party in the village temple. This he made his regular practice. Although still a boy in his early teens, being a good singer with a melodious voice, he soon came to be the central figure of the group. On occasions he would move with the group to the villages in the neighbourhood for singing *bhajans*. He developed a strong penchant for *bhajan* singing with the crowds, which in his later life was to become his chief instrument for mass awakening.

Hambirrao was much pleased with the way Debu took care of the animals. They looked healthier than anytime before and their skin shone like a plate of glass. Hambirrao was convinced of his grandson's abilities for hard work and decided to employ him on the farm. Sakhu was overjoyed when Hambirrao told her his decision and so was Debu.

For Debu, the work on the farm was a novelty. But he always loved adventures and explorations. During the course of six to eight

months, he trained himself in ploughing, harrowing, sowing, weeding, plant culturing and every other farm operation. The next two seasons saw Debu an accomplished farmer who could be relied upon to undertake cultivation on his own. This gave him a prestige in the village and at home his word came to be respected.

Sakhu thought it was high time that Debu was married for he was now well over fifteen. She spoke her mind to her father Hambhirao and brother Chandrabhan. They too thought that Debu had shown that he could stand on his own and it was time for him to get married. They therefore started looking for a bride for him, but they were soon to be disillusioned. For, when they approached the fathers of prospective brides, the latter would say, 'Well the boy is quite alright. But he does not own any land, nor has he a house of his own. How can

aspired for Debu was realized. She had come a long way from the day when everything seemed to be lost. Her son was now a responsible man who certainly had an eventful future ahead. The lad Debu was now Debuji, the industrious farmer and a person to reckon with in the village community.

But the affairs of the family were indeed far from satisfactory. Being an old man, Hambirrao had now ceased to be active and it was left to Chandrabhan to manage the household. But Chandrabhan was less interested in the farm work than in the local politics. Indeed he felt a relief that Debuji took over all the family responsibilities. For, he now found enough time to roam about in the neighbourhood and follow his wayward pursuits. He had made friend with the *sahukar* Banaji Tidke of the village Sangvi-Dugurde, who behind the screen of his sweet tongue was a heartless usurer. He thrived on the ignorance and illiteracy of the village people. His all transactions were oral and it was not his practice to give his debtors receipts for repayment. In fact, he never made written contracts. The rate of interest he charged was exorbitant and the interest went on compounding. He maintained his own accounts and the debtors had to repay whatever he quoted from his accounts. Usually they were

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aspired for Debu was realized. She had come a long way from the day when everything seemed to be lost. Her son was now a responsible man who certainly had an eventful future ahead. The lad Debu was now Debuji, the industrious farmer and a person to reckon with in the village community.

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unable to repay their loans which swelled out of all proportions. In their failure to repay the loan the *sahukar* grabbed their lands and their houses. The law could not come to their rescue, first, because they had no documents to support them and secondly, Banaji Tidke corrupted revenue and police officials by sumptuously entertaining them and by bribes.

Chandrabhan had taken loans from Banaji Tidke for marriage celebrations and such other festivities and these used to be many. He little realised that the *sahukar* was spreading a net around him. When one day Banaji quoted the aggregate loan, Chandrabhan was shaken to the roots. But he was helpless for all the transactions from his side were oral. In the end he was left with no alternative but to mortgage his lands to the *sahukar* against his debts.

This came as a great blow to the family for nobody knew what Chandrabhan was up to. Debuji's disappointment was all the more severe, for he had bent his back on these lands which no longer rightfully belonged to the family. But he was not to be defeated so easily. He laid out a strategy to recover the mortgaged lands. First thing he did was to effect economy in the expenses of the household including even the daily ration of food, and he was stern on this point. All festivities were stopped and no

extravagance was allowed. His grandfather and his mother grumbled but he would not relent. After the first harvesting season, he collected a sum of money and went to the *sahukar* to pay him the first instalment of the loan. On handing over the money to the *sahukar*, Debun asked for a receipt. Banaji Tidke was taken aback, for this was the first time in his life a debtor was asking for a receipt. But since he could not openly refuse to pass a receipt he just postponed giving it. Debun however gave him to understand that on no account he would be denied a receipt. Banaji Tidke resented this 'arrogance of the damned washerman' and made a mental note to punish him when the opportunity came.

And the opportunity which *sahukar* Tidke was looking for soon came. Years ago Chandrabhan had purchased a five-acre piece of land from Banaji Tidke. He had paid its price also. But the cunning Banaji had all along postponed executing its sale deed, on the pretext that it was a deal between two friends. And now he point-blank refused that he had ever sold the land and maintained that what he had done was only to lease it out to Chandrabhan. He demanded its possession back and even fixed a day when he would go and occupy it.

Chandrabhan broke into tears as he disclosed

this ominous news to his father in the presense of all other members of the family Debuji thought the *sahukar* had struck him below the belt For, he was in love with this particular piece and had all along given his best attention to its cultivation He was not however unnerved He calmed Chandrabhan and assured him that come what may he would not allow the *sahukar* to put his foot on the land

On the day the *sahukar* had fixed for forcible possession of the land, Debuji got up early in the morning and proceeded to the field and stood in its middle armed with a big bamboo stick The *sahukar* came with his gang of hired musclemen and standing on the bund of the field he shouted You Debuji, get out of the field 'No I won't This land belongs to us,' Debuji shouted back

Seeing that Debuji would not yield to any oral threats, Banaji made a sign to his musclemen who at once rushed into the field Within a matter of moment Debuji, who had forestalled an attack of this kind, made a dash and brandishing his bamboo stick rained a volley of blows on the men advancing him A bitter fight ensued in which Debuji was heavily mauled and sustained some serious injuries But even so he continued to fight like a wounded tiger The *sahukar* fearing that the fight might

end in the death of some men, directed his hirelings to give up. Thereupon he withdrew from the scene but before he left he threatened Debuji of dire consequences of his unruly and impudent conduct.

At home that night everybody rebuked Debuji for precipitating a crisis and incurring the wrath of the all-powerful *sahukar*. They feared the *sahukar* would send the police to arrest Debuji and he would end up behind the

The village community was reeling under the iron heels of the usury. It was a social malaise which could not be rooted out by individual action. The protest had to be launched in an organised manner. How could this be done? Who would take the lead?

The encounter with the *sahukar* set Debuj thinking and he became a moody person. He was seen all the while engrossed in his work and would not talk with anybody. The people at home thought that something was radically wrong with him. They made anxious enquiries but he would keep his mouth shut. They would not know that he was undergoing a spiritual transformation.

In the meantime, Debuj's wife Kunta gave birth to a daughter. Sakhu was most happy over the outcome and it was indeed an occasion for rejoicing. As was the custom, the friends and relatives of the family had to be entertained at a party on the naming ceremony of the new born, when liquor and meat were served to the guests. Debuj had come to love animals, birds and even insects who were all creatures of God as were human beings, and he would not agree to their slaughter on his own account. He was a strict vegetarian and a teetotaller and was emphatic that the feast to be given could only be vegetarian and under no circumstances

there could be meat and liquor in it. His grandfather and others maintained that a breach of the age-old custom would mean inviting the anger of the gods and in consequence calamities for the family. The people in the village were also of the same view and persuaded Debuji to stick to the custom. But Debuji was adamant and said that if at all a feast were to be given there could be no meat and liquor in it. Only Sakhubai supported him, for she well remembered the last words of her husband advising her to keep Debuji away from drinking and animal sacrifices. Eventually, they had to concede to Debuji's will and the party was a vegetarian and non-drinking one, which only a few villagers attended. The daughter was named Aloka.

In the course of the next four years, Kunta gave birth to two more children, first a daughter and then a son. The daughter was named Kalawati and the son Mudgal. Debuji was very fond of his son. On his account, he started taking some interest in the household. He would linger in the home a little longer, take his little boy in his laps and fondle him tenderly. But once again the fate struck him a hard blow. After a short illness the boy died. Debuji again reverted to his sullen moods, back into his shell. The general opinion in the village was that

harder now than anytime before. Without a moment's respite, he worked round-the-clock, both at the farm and in the house. With a big broom he would clean the house and the cattle-shed, shuffle tiles on the roof and plug leaking holes, wash the animals clean, dig pits for manure, remove cattle urine and dung and deposit them in the pits, fix stakes in the field hedges, repair broken bunds, weed out grass grown in the cropped fields so on and so forth. There seemed to be no end to his work. He even found time to mend his torn and tattered clothes. Seeing him break his back on all and sundry things, the people around him thought he was under the spell of some evil spirit and they feared that some day he might go insane. They tried hard to dissuade him from over-exerting himself. But he was mute and seemed oblivious of the world around him.

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THEN CAME a turning point in his life. It was indeed a strange, mistifying occurrence that brought about a complete change in him. That day he had arrived at the farm early in the

him some courage and he said, "Do you need anything?"

'What will you give? I have everything with me," the stranger said smilingly. Debuji was astounded. He had met many sages and ascetics at Runmochan and in village fairs and they always demanded one thing or the other. Here for the first time he met a sage who said he had everything, although he had nothing on him except the two jowar earheads he had plucked on the way. For a moment they stared at each other trying to know the other's mind. At last the stranger said, 'Will you come with me?'

'You have only to order me'

'Then come along'

Then they walked to the bank of the Purna. Here the stranger sat on a stone ledge, his feet dangling in the water. After a while Debuji asked the stranger imploringly, 'Will you not take your meal, Maharaj?'

'But I am taking it at present'

'No you are not! I mean, will you not cook your food?'

'Yes, certainly. What will you bring for me?'

'Everything you ask me to'

'Well, then bring wheat flour, gur, sugar, chilli, salt, oil and ghee. And don't forget to bring one frying pan'

Debuji sprang up to his feet and hastened to

a nearby village and brought all the things the stranger had listed

‘Got everything?’

‘Yes’

By the time Debuji collected some dead wood from the jungle and made a fire, the stranger had kneaded the flour into dough and mixing other things into it made a ball of the dough. He then placed the frying pan on the fire, poured oil and ghee into it and fried the ball in the pan.

‘Now go and return the pan,’ the stranger said.

Debuji went to the village to return the pan and when he came back the stranger was in readiness to leave. He said to Debuji ‘Let’s go’.

The two started. They crossed the river and came to a Mahadeva’s temple on the outskirts of the village Dapure. They got into a tamarind grove by its side, and there they stayed together for one full day.

What transpired between them during that day, what discourse they made, nothing is known. Whether the incident really took place or it was Debuji’s dream or a hallucination he had experienced, that too cannot be said. For, in his later life Gadge Baba never mentioned it in details but only in bits. One thing is however certain that whatever happened at this

time was kind of a revelation to Debuji and it marks the beginning of a new epoch in his life when breaking away from the past he goes out into the world in search of solutions to the problems which teased his mind.

His absence from the home for two days caused much anxiety for the members of his family. On the first day, they waited for him till late in the night but since he did not turn up they sent men all over the neighbourhood to search him but he was not to be found. It was likely he had gone with the *bhajan* party to some neighbouring village to sing *bhajans*, so they made enquiries with the men of the party. But the party had not moved anywhere during the last week. So where could he have gone? Considering his moods these days they feared he might have met with some disaster. His mother and his wife could not resist their tears as they thought of this frightful possibility.

On the second day late in the afternoon he came home. His mood was grave and pensive, so nobody dared to ask him any questions as to where he had gone and what he was up to. Hambirrao only reminded him that the next day he was due to go to Daryapur for some urgent work. He said he would go. Accordingly he got up early in the morning and left

for Daryapur in his bullock-cart. He stayed there for the whole day and returned late in the evening.

But while he was off at Daryapur, a stranger came to the village. His hair were long and dishevelled and the *kafni* he was wearing was torn and soiled. He looked like an ascetic. He went from one end of the village to the other calling out loudly, 'O Devidas! Devidas! Where are you?' The villagers told him that there was no person in the village Devidas by name. Even so the stranger persisted in calling out for Devidas. The people thought he must be one of those tramps who roam about the country or he might even be a child-lifter. So they drove him out of the village.

When Debuji returned home in the evening they told him of the stranger and the way he went on calling out for some 'Devidas'. Debuji could at once see that the stranger was none else than the sage with whom he had lived the other day. For certain the sage had come to meet him and he had named him 'Devidas'—God's disciple! He felt sore for his absence from the village when the sage came and a pang of agony surged up in his heart when he learnt that the sage was not shown any hospitality but was driven out of the village. At the same time he was overwhelmed with emotions.

as he thought of the sublime role the sage contemplated for him God's disciple ! That was then his destiny !

But he must first find out his God. And where? Search of God for himself alone or for the seething mass of humanity? Around him he saw stark poverty, squalor, filth, vice, ignorance, hatred and enmity by one group of people for another. How could God allow these to pass? If they could never be the attributes of God, what were they? Immersed in his thoughts, he did not take his food that night. He got up and went to the temple where a *kirtan* was going on. The deeply devotional songs of Kabir and Tukaram's *abhangas* sung in the *kirtan* gave an edge to his thoughts and an articulation his mind was struggling for.

Returning home he did not go to sleep. Instead, with his back to a pole he sat knees drawn up in the verandah outside. As the night deepened, he was still thinking of the way to emancipation of the soul, about which the great teachers of the past had so eloquently spoken. The hours rolled on and he heard the cock crowing from the hedge in a nearby field. He also heard the flutter of the birds in the trees, impatient in their waiting for the light of the day. He stood up and saw a *Shimmer* on the eastern horizon and he smiled,

for now the way before him was clear and he had made up his mind. Soon the eastern sky was a riot of red and crimson colours and a new hope sprung up in his heart. He walked inside the house. All his people were still in sound sleep. He picked up an earthen pot from the kitchen and a stick standing in a corner. These were to be the symbols of his person in the years to come. He threw a glance at his wife and his children. He bowed to his mother and grandfather. Then turning his back on them he stepped out of the house, never to return.

He might not have known at the moment but two thousand years before him, a man had renounced his house, his loving wife and his new-born child in the way he did to seek salvation for the woes of mankind. He was Gautam Buddha. In the mission he undertook later, Gadge Baba followed in the footsteps of the Great Enlightened One.

4

'IF YOU ARE LOCKED within the four walls of your home and tied to your family, you will never know the world. To know it, you must

move over the vast stretches of the land, see it in its vivid colours and shapes and meet multitudes of people that inhabit it,' that was the thought uppermost in Debuji's mind when he left his home. He was thirty then.

The story hereafter of Debuji's life — who came to be known as Gadge Baba all through his land — relates to his great wanderings. It was so to say a pilgrimage, not to places of worship, but to the dwellings of the poor and the grief-stricken. It was the grandest ever effort made by one single person to educate the people in leading the life of purity and cleanliness, both in the physical and the spiritual sense. No other man than he perhaps understood better the wisdom of the maxim that cleanliness is only next to godliness. First and foremost Gadge Baba was a simple, practical man, who never got himself enmeshed into metaphysical complexities of thought, a luxury of the learned pundits. He craved for the simplicity of life as the nature meant it to be. His teachings were thus, simple for even an uneducated and illiterate person to grasp their significance.

There are two phases of his wandering pilgrimage. The first was *sadhana*, that is self-preparation, of educating himself. In the second, he was the educator, the social reformer,

the preacher who preached not from the high pedestal of learning but by practical demonstrations in self-help. In all his life, Tukaram, the great Marathi saint, was his guiding star, whose *abhangas* he profusely quoted in his *kirtans*. They were often the starting point of his discourses. *Gadge* means an earthen pot and *Baba* is a nick name for father or a fatherly person. Gadge Baba always carried a broken piece of an earthen pot on his head, which he used as a dish for food and it also served as a skull-cap. This made him quite conspicuous and that is how people came to call him Gadge Baba.

On leaving home, he rambled in Varhad, his native region. He moved randomly from one village to the other. But although he had not planned his sojourns, there is no doubt that he had set before him a definite objective for his nomadic career. This is evident from certain resolutions he made before he started his wandering excursions. The first of these was not to reveal his caste to people he would meet, whatever might then be the provocation. In India where everything goes by caste, this decision was most remarkable and it is a significant pointer to his thinking at the time and his social outlook as a whole. He was by birth a *parit*, that is a washerman. In the Hindu

society, as is well known, the birth decides a person's caste. It is the one governing factor for all social intercourse and social relations. The rigidity of the caste system, solidified through centuries to a cement-concrete hardness, is the most formidable obstacle in the evolution of an egalitarian social order, which had been the cherished dream of the great exponents of the *bhakti* ideal in the past and the social reformers who came in the wake of the British Raj. But all their efforts did not go beyond making small dents here or there in the system.

On this background, Gadge Baba's resolution to free himself from the bonds of the caste and become a caste-less person, sounds revolutionary indeed. This often landed him in serious difficulties. But he did not mind them. In fact he seemed to invite them. When he refused to disclose his caste, people thought he was an untouchable who was hiding his caste and they would drive him away. This gave him to experience the feelings of the outcast communities over the matter of their social segregation. This experience was essential for him as he was determined to wage a battle against social inequalities, of which untouchability is the most hideous manifestation. He would sometimes test the caste sus-

after some days his clothes were very much torn and could no longer cover his body To buy new clothes he had no money, for he kept none with him as a matter of principle The way he mended his tattered clothes was most ingenious He collected a pile of rags lying here and there and also from tailors shops where they are a waste He sewed them on his shirt and lion-cloth and turned them into sort of a new dress As the rags were of different colours, his dress took on a variegated and weird appearance He took such a fancy for this multi coloured dress that he continued to wear it to the last By this dress he could be easily spotted from a long distance and in thick crowds

He earned his bread by working for the people He would go to a potter in the village and knead his clay, to a carpenter and saw his wood or to a blacksmith and operate his bellows or help him fix iron tyres on cart wheels If on the way he saw an old woman carrying a heavy load on her head he would relieve her of the burden and carry it for her to her house He would enter a field and help the the peasants in their work An adept hand in farm work, he would plough and harrow a field, sow seeds, harvest a crop, thrash corn—in short do anything that he might be asked to do In re-

muneration he would only take bread from the people whom he had helped. If they gave him money he would refuse it point-blank and insist on giving bread. He loathed money which he thought was the root cause of many social troubles and personal tragedies. On receiving his bread he would go and sit under a tree or by the side of a wall of some old, deserted house and eat it with a chilli chutney or an onion. All through these years his food was confined to these two or three things only.

Of course it was not always easy to find work. Many suspected that he was an outcast and then they not only refused him work but threatened to blow his head if he did not clear away instantly. He would also not leave before he had made a mockery of their downright follies and thus often brought him to face serious situations.

When he did not get work, he would go from door to door for food like a begger. From the gate outside he would call out '*Bhakar vadhge baya*' — 'O lady of the house, bring bread for me'. Some would give, but many thought he was a lazy mendicant and drove him away. At Chandur, the *patil* (village headman) flogged him with a cane when he had the 'temerity' to ask for *punan-polis* and ghee instead of bread, which was what a 'begger' could get at

the most. (A *puran-poli* is a sort of wheat-cake with mashed gram flour and sugar or gur filled inside and eaten with ghee. It is probably the most favourite dish of the Marathi people for festival occasions).

With remarkable patience, almost amazing one must say, he endured the cruel and inhuman treatment meted out to him by the people, precisely because he had calculated in his mind that he was on a trial during this period. Had not Tukaram said that before a person aspired to achieve any great things in life he must first take on the hammer blows of his detractors? He had to know the people, their passions and their prejudices, if he were to work for an awakening among them and bring about a change of their hearts. This was his *sadhana* and *tapascharya*, preparation and penance.

Once, while he was in Murtijapur, a relative of the family saw him cleaning the ground where a fair was held. Although he was now a completely changed man, the relative recognised him and sent a word to his mother at Dapure that Debuji was in the town. Receiving the message, Sakhubai, his wife Kunta and her children and his other relatives made a dash to Runmochan where they expected him to move next for the big annual fair to be held

at that place on the following day. They had rightly guessed. They found him on the river bank digging with a spade and a shovel in the mud. He was cutting steps in the slope of the river bank for the convenience of the pilgrims. At long last Debuji was found ! He had grown a bushy beard and his dress was fantastic. He looked quite a stranger, much different from what he used to in the past. But he was Debuji no doubt and here he stood before them. Tears welled up in Kunta's eyes having had to meet her husband in such strange circumstances.

Sakhubai and others went and sat around him. He did not take any notice of them and continued to dig in the mud. A big crowd by now gathered there. After waiting for a while Sakhubai said, 'Debu, my son ! Debuji, will you not come home ? See here is your wife and your children.' He did not respond. The others also tried to speak to him but he kept silent. Then in a burst of emotion Sakhubai said, 'Don't you realise how we must have suffered after you left us, how miserable must be your wife by this forced widowhood, how your children have craved to see their father ?' This also made no effect on him and he continued to dig taking no cognisance of them. Sakhubai could no longer restrain her anger and she said

harshly, 'You heartless man! Why are you so cruel, to us? What wrong have we done to you?' And yet this went unheeded. As a last attempt to move him Sakhubai placed his young son in front of him and said, 'If you don't want to look at us, well don't. But at least look to your young son whose innocence you cannot doubt'. When this even failed to make him open his mouth, they withdrew in utter despair and all the joy they had felt over his discovery melted.

Even then in the next two or three days they continued to make entreaties to him to return but he remained unmoved. And then one day he spoke, he said, 'You want me to come home. But I never had a home. The one which my father had, was lost to the *sahukar*. The one at Dapure belongs to my uncle. So where is my home? Ah, I have one now! It has the sky for its roof, the four horizons for its walls and the earth for its floor. And I am not alone. I have many, many mothers, sisters and brothers among the poor with whom I live'. Then addressing his mother and his wife he said, 'Don't be afraid to live without me. God is there to protect you. But if you want me, come along with me and live as I do'. What could they say to this? Some thought that he had turned a lunatic, which was the punishment

God gave him for having refused to make goat sacrifices. Years later, however, when he came to be loved and revered by thousands, his mother and wife realised his motivations and were convinced that he was engaged in the work of God. They not only forgave him for having deserted them but associated with him in his work to the extent it was possible for them.

5

AS HE MOVED among the people, what did he see? Barring a small number of people in the top layers of society, the masses lived in abject poverty. The poor, vast in their number, slaved for the rich few, and they accepted their slavery ungrudgingly as the order of nature and willed by God. This was fatalism ordained by the orthodox religion and age-old customs and traditions. While the economic inequalities split the society vertically, the caste system horizontally. At the bottom were the untouchables, whose lot was not better than animals. It was even worse. They were subjected to social segregation of the worst kind in the

human history. Even the shadow of an untouchable was sacrilegious !

The magnitude of these problems was vast and stupendous enough to shake even the boldest of optimists. But Gadge Baba was not discouraged by it and the secret of his strength lay in the fact that he lived among the poor and was one of them. He did not suffer from distance, as other social reformers from the upper classes usually did.

For some years in the beginning, the people among whom he moved took him to be just a loafer who pestered them for food. But gradually a change came over in their attitude as he started performing *bhajans* in the village fairs and other social gatherings. From his early young age, he was very well trained in *bhajan* recitations and had learnt a good many *abhangas*, which he now sang with such verve and vigour that people flocked around him and listened intently. From *bhajan* to *kirtan* was not a far cry.

Bhajan is a recital of devotional songs, sung to the tune of *tal* (cymbals) and *mridung* (a percussion instrument played by beats of fingers), while *kirtan* is a discourse or a sermon given by a priestly person, the *kirtankar*, interspersed with spiritual hymns and songs which exemplify the theme of the sermon.

Gadge Baba was no longer a man unwanted. On the contrary his appearance made quite a stir in the locality he visited. The men kept their work aside for a while and came forward to greet him and the women stood in the doors to have a glimpse as he passed on the road, blaring out his evocatory slogan, 'Gopala! Gopala! Devakinandan Gopala! (Gopal! O, Gopal! O, son of Devaki' — Gopal is another name of Lord Krishna) His entry in the village had always a dramatic touch. He came darting and started cleaning the site where he held his *kirtan*. If the villagers did not know who he was, he would go to the temple and start cleaning the ground there. Someone present in the temple would ask him why he was doing this. He would reply 'Don't you know there is a *kirtan* here to night?'

'Whose *kirtan*?'

'I hear some holy man is coming'

The news would soon spread in the village that a holy man was coming to deliver *kirtan* in the temple. The villagers then made all the arrangements for the *kirtan* and in the night the temple was fully packed. Then Gadge Baba

with his ringing slogan '*Gopala! Gopala! Devakinandan Gopala*'. His rich, strident voice immediately captured the mood of the audience and he carried them with him as he dwelt upon the material and spiritual problems that plagued them. Those who once heard him never forgot him later and they eagerly awaited his next visit.

Thanks to his *kirtans*, his popularity with the rural people grew by leaps and bounds and the day was not far to come when he was the most endeared person of the masses. A large number of self-less workers gathered around him, which testified to the deeper impact his work was making on the people. These men came from different parts of the state, as wide apart as Nagpur and Ratnagiri. There were many among them who renounced their home and their families in the manner he did and consecrated their entire lives to his mission and the various institutions he was to build later. Ganpatrao Gangan, Jagoba Borkar, Tulsiram Phulzele, Achyutrao Deshmukh, Zehuji Patil, Gunidas Zembre, Mhatarba Kumbhar are the few names which could be mentioned here, the list otherwise would spread over many pages. For Gadge Baba, these men were his co-workers and companions and he never would tolerate any implication, let alone mention, of master-

disciple relationship in their association. The fact that men like Jagoba Borkar and Tulsiram Phulzele belonged to the untouchable communities was significant enough in view of the drive he undertook against social inequalities in general and untouchability in particular. They used to have mass dinners on the occasion of his *kirtan* programmes and men of all communities sat together to eat food, discrimination in regard to castes being strictly prohibited.

The *kirtan* was of course the most effective weapon in his armoury in the battle he waged against the ills society suffered. The topics he dealt with had always a direct relevance to the workaday life of the people. Untouchability, violence in the form of bloody animal sacrifices, usury of the *sahukars*, ignorance and superstitions of the people, their unclean habits and tolerance for filthiness in public places, drink vice and the like were the targets of his attack. He came directly and heavily on them and never minced words. He spoke in the language the people speak that has a natural force and punch which the sophisticated tongue of the educated people of the upper classes woefully lack. He drew his strength from the vast experience of men and matters he had accumulated in his wayfaring life, and he could give any

number of instances to drive his point home. What made his discourses very lively was that they used to be humour-packed. He often derided his listeners and made them laugh at their own follies. His sarcasm was not, however, bitter or disdainful. It had the warmth and cheer of a comedy player. Never indulging into lengthy and tiresome perorations, he patently engaged his audience in a heart-to-heart conversation. Here is one instance, where he ridicules the religious practice among the Hindus, especially the backward classes, of worshipping all kinds of deities and making them animal sacrifices.

He was a shrewd observer of human nature and to win the confidence of the people he first eulogizes them for their righteous conduct and their faith in God and then says. 'The one who created this earth, hung the sky as the roof over it and stuck the stars to this roof, the one who gives us rains, is He one one or two?

The people are puzzled, but they have to give the answer. A few of them say in a low, hesitant voice, 'One !'

He laughs and says, 'Why do you feel so shy to affirm what you believe? Speak loudly'.

The people say now in a chorus 'One'.

'Are you sure? Otherwise you will waver

afterwards. Think carefully before you answer — how many gods are there?

‘One ! !’

‘All right! New count. Is there not a temple of Khandoba in your village?’

‘Yes, there is.’

‘Then how many gods that makes?’

‘Two’.

‘There are Mhasobas on your field bunds. Are they not?’

‘They are’.

‘Then how many gods are there?’

‘Three’.

‘Marimay has come and squat on the outskirts of your village. Has she not?’

‘Yes, she has’.

‘Then how many gods are there now?’

‘Four’.

‘Don’t you worship Matamai?’

‘We do.’

‘That takes the number to how much?’

‘Five’.

In this way he makes them divulge the names of several other deities like Viroba, Vetāl, Phetal, Mairāl, Jakhai, Jokhai, Yeshkai. They now begin to feel that they have made a fool of themselves, when he comes down on them, ‘The number of gods has now well risen to fifteen. Isn’t it?’

‘Yes, it has.’

‘Well! Even with these you are not satisfied. You seek the blessings of the *pir*. Isn’t that true?’

‘Yes, it’s true.’

‘Our Muslim brothers take out Tazias on the day of muharam, when you walk under them. Don’t you?’

‘Yes, we do.’

‘Strange! A little while ago you said that there is only one god. . Had you then mortgaged your wit to the grocer?’

The people are startled and confused. Even in their bewilderment they are keen to know what next he has to say.

He is still at the game. He says, ‘Well, do you make sacrifices to your gods?’

‘We do.’

‘And don’t you say to your god, “Oh, God! My child is ill. Be kind to me and cure him. I will kill a goat in sacrifice”?’

‘Yes, that is what we say’.

‘Don’t you offer him the quadruped so that in return he may free the biped’

‘Yes, we do’.

‘But why? Does the two-legged creature leave a bitter taste in God’s mouth? And the one who has created this world, is he so wretchedly greedy and corrupt? What kind of God

is he who craves for the flesh of a goat? Is he a peon in the government office who for a petty bribe lets you in to see the boss?

'No, he is not'.

'Then is it not sheer frivolity to think that you can bribe the Creator of this Universe? Allright, you have vowed to offer Him a goat, and your wish is fulfilled. Then just release a goat in the name of God and leave it to Him to decide whether to eat it raw, roast it or send it for grazing. Am I right?'

'Yes, you are right.'

With such remarkable polemic skill and ingenuity, he brought forth participation of his audiences in his discourses and inspired them to support the causes he championed. One Shambhurao Sambhus was a member of his *bhajan* party, who all along kept him company. Sambhus was a Brahmin by caste. Gadge Baba always made him stand beside him in his *kirtans*. Launching a fierce attack on untouchability, he would ask Sambhus, 'Brohter, you are a Brahmin'.

'Yes, I am'.

'How many teeth have you in your mouth?'

'Thirty two'.

'Why not thirty four?'

'No, that can't be'.

'And how many teeth has Arjun Mang in his mouth? (Mang is an outcast community).

'He also has thirty two'.

'Why not twenty seven or twenty eight?'

'No, that's impossible.'

Then turning to the audience he would say, 'If, as you have seen, nature has made all men alike, from where this pestilence of untouchability came? The god of the Mahars is the same as that of the Brahmins and the Marathas. The sky is the same for both the Mangas and the Gujrathis and Marwadis. The same sun glows for the Chambaras and the Kaysthas and Shenvis. Or are there different gods, different skies and different suns for different communities?'

"No," the crowd would roar.

His peasant stock bore a distinct mark in his personality, which ensured his easy acceptance by the common working class people. He was strong and hefty, wheat complexioned with a broad oval face, straight pointed nose, full lips and deeply penetrating eyes. He was strong-willed and a stern disciplinarian. He made everyone who accompanied him in his campaigns to put in hard work as he himself did. Lethargy and laziness were an anathema to him. Above everything, he considered himself to be a volunteer and inspired others

to act like him. The broom was his symbol for manual labour and service, and wherever he went for *kirtan* he would first start with cleaning ground. In the beginning the people around would look on with curiosity and fun while he went on cleaning. But later when they understood his motives, they came forward and enthusiastically participated in his cleaning campaigns. Whenever he visited big cities like Bombay, his first activity was to go to the back street slums and undertake what we may call 'Operation Garbage'. With his band of workers he cleaned the litter and filth in the area and the residents of the locality, out of shame at least, if not anything else, joined him.

At the end of the *kirtan* the people would rush to him to bow at his feet, a traditional gesture among the Hindus for expressing one's reverence to and humility before a great person. But he never allowed anyone to touch his feet, for he thought it was degrading human dignity. As soon as the performance was over, he darted out of the crowds and disappeared in the darkness leaving the people to wonder where he could have possibly gone when only a moment before he was amidst them. Once out of the crowd, he hurried to some distant place outside the town and there ate his food.

in the broken piece of an earthen pot which he invariably carried with him. Even after he had gained widest possible popularity and money flowed in for his building projects, his diet consisted of one bread, half a bowl of curry and chutney and he would never accept anything more from his hosts.

6

HE CARRIED out his extensive *kirtan* campaigns with the sole object of making people see the futility of time-barred customs and irrational practices and develop a rational and robust outlook of life. He was, however, least interested in the abstract or theoretical connotations of these problems. From experience he knew only too well that a ton of precepts was not worth an ounce of practice. For instance, merely telling people that superstitions were a stupidity was hardly enough. What was needed was to provide them with modern education which alone could dispel ignorance and superstitions. Similarly, a mere exhortation to the people to learn to look beyond their castes was bound to prove unfruitful, unless proper facilities were made available to the people of dif-

ferent communities to come close in a social communion To achieve these objectives, a systematic and organised effort was necessary, which in other words meant building up appropriate institutions to carry on these various activities Gadge Baba had enough insight and sagacity to grasp this basic truth about the process of social progress and his mind now started seriously thinking in terms of it

Initially, Gadge Baba had made Runmochan the centre of his activities, from where he would fan out in the surrounding areas Runmochan is a place of pilgrimage in Vidarbha Thousands of pilgrims from all over the region congregated here for the annual fair and bathed in the Purna river, a ritual which every pilgrim must perform The bathers, thousands in number, spilled water on the banks of the river and the whole place became a big pool of mud As a result, the pilgrims and especially women suffered considerable hardships and indignities Gadge Baba was much distressed to see this plight of the pilgrims and decided to put an end to it by constructing a *ghat* (a stone-paved platform) along the bank He was only to announce his decision and money streamed in from all quarters into his coffer, the pilgrims contributing their mite to the fund Some

wealthy persons' in the locality, who by now had come to hold Gadge Baba in high esteem, came out with liberal donations. Surprisingly, *sahukar* Tidke who was once the enemy of the family, had veered round in repentance, thanks to Gadge Baba's widespread reputation as the man in the service of God, and Tidke's was the biggest donation. It speaks very highly of Gadge Baba's exceptional organising ability that he raised a large volunteer labour force for carrying out manual work, and he was himself one among the volunteers. From morn to night he would be present on the site supervising every small detail of the work and he was most particular that the accounts were kept properly down to the last paisa. The enthusiasm among the people was so great that not only one, as he had originally visualised, but three ghats were constructioned at Runmochan within a couple of years. This *ghat* at Runmochan was the first in the chain of similar building works Gadge Baba executed at other places of pilgrimage in Maharashtra. It also set a pattern for fund raising and employment of manual labour on a voluntary basis.

Gadge Baba next turned his attention to Pandharpur, the centre of the *bhakti* cult for over eight centuries and ever since the biggest place of pilgrimage in Maharashtra, where

several lakhs of *waikan* pilgrims turned on the eleventh day of the months of Ashadh and Kartik. But despite all its sacredness the town presented an awefully disgusting sight during the days of the two fairs. Since facilities for housing and shelter were totally lacking, the pilgrims stayed in the open grounds around the town and the sands of the Chandrabhaga river. In the absence of any sanitary conveniences the place was turned into a vast dump of filth, garbage and excrement. When Gadge Baba first saw it, it made him restless. How could a place make any claim for holiness if it stank and was a source of all sorts of epidemics? Ashadh is the month of heavy rainfall rendering the whole place all the more dank and muddy. The lot of those of the untouchable communities was the worst because they were the poorest of the pilgrims. The problem was not easy to solve for it was a matter of providing shelter to tens of thousands of people. But Gadge Baba took up the challenge and decided to build, in the first instance, a *dharmashala* for the pilgrims of the untouchable communities. And once he took up a thing he went in a big way to do it. The experience of Runmochan had given him adequate confidence to shoulder big responsibilities of this kind. Money presented no pro-

blem to him. He now wielded such a magic influence on the minds of the people that they readily contributed to the cause he espoused. Contributions were made by the common people as well as the philanthropically minded rich persons. Besides Maharashtra, there were donors from the adjoining provinces of Gujarat and Karnataka also. Very soon a specious building came up in the precincts of the town. The *dharmashala* was significantly named after the saint Chokhamela, who was Mahar by caste.

Chokha was a contemporary of the great great Dynaneshwar and also his close companion. He was one among the galaxy of the Marathi saints who were the torch bearers of the *bhakti* ideology in the 12th and 13th centuries A.D. It is not an accident of history that many of these saints hailed from the lower castes. Dnyaneshwar and Namdeo were the leading figures among them. The first tenet of the *bhakti* ideology is that men, to whatever community they belong, have a direct access to God without any intermediaries like the priestly class. Its avowed aim was to establish equality among men on the spiritual plane. Gadge Baba had obviously these ideas in his mind when he named his first *dharmashala* after Chokhamela. Later he built two more

dharmashalas at Pandharpur, one for the Parit community and the second for the Maratha community. The three *dharmashalas*, commodious and with beautiful gardens around them, provide shelter and cooking facilities for the lodgers. They indeed went a long way to mitigate the hardships of the poor pilgrims.

After Pandharpur came Nasik on Gadge Baba's list of public works. Nasik is another place of pilgrimage visited by pilgrims from all parts of India and all the year round. At Nasik, Gadge Baba constructed a magnificent, multi-tier edifice on the slope of a hill which was once an arid and deserted place. The *dharmashala* is adjoining to the funeral ground of the city and many people felt this was inauspicious. But Gadge Baba was undaunted by any such fears, for he did not think death as something horrible but a natural end of life. A home for physically disabled persons and lepers is attached to this *dharmashala*. In the following years he built *dharmashalas* at Alandi and Dehu, both places of pilgrimage near Pune, one at Akul in the vicinity of Pune city and one at Bombay as an adjunct to the J. J. Hospital for the relatives of the poor patients. The Bombay *dharmashala* proved a great boon to the people from the villages in the interior parts of the state, who brought their patients to Bombay.

for medical aid and had no place to live in the city. It shows with what foresight and sense of involvement Gadge Baba dealt with the problems of the poor.

Gadge Baba, although he had never learnt to read and write, was keenly conscious of the rôle education could play in alleviating many of the sufferings of the poor. It was a common practice with the landlords and the money-lenders all over the country to cheat the peasants in land and money transactions, taking ill advantage of the ignorance and illiteracy of the latter. Gadge Baba and his family were themselves the victims of this cruel game. Education ensured progress in many ways, both in the material and spiritual spheres. But although nearly a century had passed since the British Government introduced a system of liberal education in the country it had made little headway so far as the rural areas were concerned. During his wanderings, Gadge Baba had seen with his own eyes how children in the villages were deprived of even elementary education, first because there were no schools in the villages and secondly, their parents could not afford to keep them in the towns where educational facilities were available. Resolving that he must do something for the education of the children in the rural areas, Gadge Baba laun-

ched a massive programme of opening schools and building hostels for the rural children. It is to the credit of his tremendous driving force and organising capacity that he set up as many as 42 educational institutions in different parts of Maharashtra catering to the needs of the rural people. These include high schools in larger towns, *ashram shalas* (residential schools) for children of the tribal and nomadic communities and hostels for boys and for girls. In 1952, he created a trust, named Gadge Maharaj Mission, to look after the management of these institutions. A detailed list of the schools and hostels managed by the Trust is given in the Appendix I.

Once during his visit to Pandharpur Gadge Baba saw an old man lying by the roadside in most abject and pitiable condition. The man had starved for many days and was very ill. He was asking for water to the people who passed by him but nobody even cared to look at him. Gadge Baba with his band of volunteers picked the man and lodged him in one of his cottages. Thereafter, so long as Gadge Baba was in Pandharpur he nursed the sick old man, cleaned him and even disposed of his urine and excreta. The man did not however survive long and died of his illness. Gadge Baba had come across many such old men who due to their old

age and senile illnesses were a burden to themselves and their families. Many of them found impossible to adjust with their young people. Desperate and frustrated they often set out on pilgrimages but instead of finding any solace in them underwent terrible hardships and were forced to live a forlorn, dejected life. Special homes for such old people was a social necessity. Gadge Baba is the pioneer in this field, he built a home for the old and infirm at Valgaon way back in the forties. The example set by him has not however received much attention either of the government or public bodies, for few such homes have come up since.

7

GEORGE BERNARD Shaw, the great English playwright, had once said of Mahatma Gandhi that Gandhi was not a person but phenomena. The same could be said with equal justice about Gadge Baba. Judging by any standard, what he did for the poor is phenomenal, which has very few parallels in the annals of Maharashtra's recent history. His achievements *could not fail to draw thinkers, politicians, writers and artists towards him.* One cannot

think of a better testimony to his achievements than the fact that Dr B R Ambedkar, the architect of free India's constitution and history's greatest crusader against untouchability, was his most ardent admirer. The Chokhamela *dharmashala* at Pandharpur had amply convinced Dr Ambedkar of the genuine urge Gadge Baba felt for the betterment of the lot of the untouchables. Indeed Dr Ambedkar's feeling for him was much more than admiration. It was a feeling of deep reverence, for Dr Ambedkar looked to him as his *guru*, the master. Dr Ambedkar more than once met him and held discussions with him on social problems. It is on record that before he relinquished Hindu fold and embraced Buddhism, Dr Ambedkar had consulted Gadge Baba and sought his blessings.

Once when in Pandharpur Gadge Baba was on the construction site of one of his *dharmashalas* watching the progress of work, a young educated man came to him and rebuked him. Seeing him clad in strange clothes and sporting a scraggly beard, the young man thought he was a *Buwa* (a self professed sage who exploits people by deceitful means) and in an impulse of righteous indignation he said, 'You are a hypocrite. You cheat people.'

‘To be sure you are an educated man. Why don’t you then teach an ignorant man like me how to behave?’ was the humble reply Gadge Baba gave to the young man. Some years after this incident Gadge Baba had some problems in regard to appointment of trustees for his *dharmashalas* and he was advised to go to Bombay and consult solicitor Mr. B. G. Kher. Subsequently, in Bombay Gadge Baba went to see Mr. Kher in his solicitor’s firm. When he entered his office, he at once knew that solicitor Kher was none else than the young man who once rebuked him in Pandharpur. In the intervening period, however, Kher had come to realise the real worth of Gadge Baba’s work and had become his ardent admirer. Before talking on business, Kher bowed to Gadge Baba and apologised for the unkind words he had said to him. After this the two became very intimate friends and Kher was his adviser in legal matters and a devotee too. Later when Kher became the first Chief Minister of the erstwhile Bombay State, he placed a government vehicle at Gadge Baba’s disposal to enable him to intensify his activities in regard to abolition of untouchability and prohibition. Whenever Gadge Baba made a suggestion that a certain work be carried out for the welfare of the people, Kher most promptly acted on it. It

was at the instance of Gadge Baba that Kher got printed by his government the authentic edition of Tukaram's *Gatha* (collection of verse) It was edited by Mr P M Lad, the renowned research scholar and a high ranking officer in Kher's government

In 1937, the annual session of the Indian National Congress was held at Faizpur, a big sized village in Jalgaon district In the pre-Independence days, the Congress sessions used to be huge assemblages attended by several thousand people The Faizpur session was unique for it was the first ever session held in a village But this posed certain difficulties for the organisers of the session as there was not adequate man power available in the rural areas for all and sundry works, as it was in the cities The work of erecting the pandal for the conference and the tents for the shelter of the delegates was somehow got completed, but the site ground was still littered all over with debris and garbage although only a day was left for the session Kher and other members of the reception committee passed some very anxious moments over this state of affairs Gadge Baba who was in Faizpur at this time learned about Kher's anxiety and he went to him and assured him that everything would be alright before the next morning He deployed

his army of 'broom volunteers' four hundred strong on the work of cleaning. They worked all through night and before daybreak everything was spick and span. Kher had no words to express his gratitude to Gadge Baba for what he had done in such a short time. Gadge Baba made the broom a symbol of cleanliness and self-help. He gave it a respectability which in turn meant dignity for manual labour.

Gadge Baba's admirers were a legion and they included many distinguished personalities in the public life of Maharashtra. Among them were Dr. Punjabrao Deshmukh, the educationist and once a minister in Pundit Nehru's cabinet at the centre, Mr. Bhaurao Patil, the pioneer in the field of rural education, Tukdoji Maharaj, the saint and social reformer like himself, Mr. Anant Hari Gadre, the eminent journalist and social worker, Mr. P. K. Atre and Mr. G. N. Dandekar, both veteran Marathi authors, Probhodhankar Thakre, the social reformer and journalist, who wrote the first ever biography of Gadge Baba, Mr. Malojirao Naik-Nimbalkar and Mr. G. D. Tapase, both at one time ministers in Kher's cabinet in the erstwhile Bombay state, the latter at present the Governor of Uttar Pradesh.

Atre once accompanied Gadge Baba in his kirtan tour and was amazed by Gadge Baba's

dexterity and skill in transmitting his ideas to the unlettered masses. Atre then came out with a brilliant article in appreciation of Gadge Baba's extraordinary powers of communication and the service he was rendering to the poor people. Says Atre, 'Gadge Baba is himself an illiterate person. He can neither write nor read. His thumb impression is his signature. He is least enamoured of the affluent rich or the cultured and educated people in society. He is, as Tukaram has said, 'the one who says the afflicted and the oppressed are mine.' Like a lump of butter he melts at the sight of miseries in the world. He is the very incarnation of God who holds to his bosom those hapless beings who have nobody to protect them; wipes tears in their eyes and heals their wounds with a delicate touch. For the last fifty years Gadge Baba is moving day and night in all parts of Maharashtra and rendering service to the poor and the distressed in more than one way. There is a belief among the educated people that Mahatma Gandhi introduced the broom technique in this country. But that is wholly incorrect. For fifty years, Gadge Baba is roving in the land with a broom in his hand and a piece of an earthen pot on his head. Whichever village he might step in, the first thing pressed into service is the broom in his

hand. Then the people are awakened and they come running with their brooms. In the morning he cleans the dirt in the village and in the evening the dirt in the heads of the people. That is the aim of his life and the technique of his service. For a half century, this great social reformer is erasing himself like sandal wood and eroding every tissue of his body for the well-being of the people. Gadge Baba totally disbelieves in miracles. But he himself is at the present moment a moving miracle in India'.

Dandekar is Gadge Baba's Marathi biographer. For many months Dandekar lived and travelled with Gadge Baba and had first-hand knowledge of his various activities, as also the working of his mind. The one great merit of Dandekar's book is that he has extensively quoted many of Gadge Baba's discourses and that too in the Varhadi dialect he spoke.

Apparently it might appear that Gadge Baba was unkind to his family when he left home and turned down entreaties made by his mother and his wife to return home and assume his responsibility as the bread-earner of the family. But in retrospect one can see that he was at that time in a mood of complete renunciation and was yet groping for the way to reach his destiny. Once he found it, he relented and did show some interest in his family.

He took lead in contracting marriages of his daughter Kalavati and son Govinda. He however dictated how the wedding should take place. In either marriage, there were no celebrations no ceremony, no feast, but only get-together of the two families. He was sternly opposed to any kind of ostentation and waste of expenditure and he acted up to his principles. He arranged for the residence of his mother, wife and son in a cottage at Amla village. But beyond that he did nothing for them, and left it entirely to them to eke out their living by hard labour. He did not give them a single paisa from the funds he raised or the donations he received for his activities. In the same manner, he did not associate any of his relatives, nor even his wife, with the trusts he made of his several institutions. It is indeed a tribute to his selflessness and the purity he maintained in his public affairs. No matter how hard and toilsome was her life, Sakhubai bore a blissful feeling in her heart that the name of her son had spread far and wide in the land and was endeared to thousands of people. In 1923, she fell seriously ill which brought her death. Before she died, she yearned to have a last glimpse of her illustrious son, but he was far too away on his *kirtan* tour and her last wish remain unfulfilled.

GADGE BABA'S life is a veritable odyssey of his great wayfaring and his public harangues before innumerable audiences and above all his service to the humanity. He left his home in 1905 and since then for well over fifty years he kept on moving from village to village and from town to town as long as he could make him stand on his legs. In 1951, when he was in his seventy-fifth year, he showed first signs of failing health. But he would not have been what he was if he had stopped his campaigning. The body had started groaning but the spirit was still agile and buoyant. Rest was something alien to him. If anybody advised him rest, he would promptly reply, 'My friend, this body is a hired horse. The more you fondle it, the more docile and lazy it will become. And the more you make it run in the ring, the more it will work for you.'

In spite of his indifferent health, his sallies continued unabated during the next five years. If one day he was in Nagpur, on the next he would be in Amravati or Wardha and still next in Nasik or Poona. When he wanted to, he moved with a lightning speed. If it were a longer journey, he travelled by the railway also, but always without a ticket like stow-

aways. He would squat on the floor of the carriage by the side of the water-closet to avoid the gaze of other passengers and more particularly the notice of the railway inspectors. If the ticket checker did not see him, well and good. But his unkempt dress often betrayed him and he was caught. They then bundled him out of the compartment and locked him in the custody for a day or two. Once out he would board the next available train. But in later years when he came to be known as the great Gadge Baba, the railway staff was most courteous to him and offered him all amenities and comforts, which he of course declined to take. The passengers offered him their seats but he preferred to squat on the floor as he used to before.

But however the spirit might be ebullient, the age now began to tell on him and in April of 1953 he twice fell unconscious while he was journeying in Marathwada. Diabetes had overtaken him but he refused to take any medicine for he was a firm believer in nature cure. Only when he had lost consciousness or was too weak to resist, his colleagues could manage for the doctors to administer him some medicine or give him injections. But this of course could not restrain the powerful urge he always felt to go places and meet people.

(except the areas under the jurisdiction of the police of autonomous
~~entities) carry out those functions as listed in Article 2, Paragraph 2.~~

In 1911

Gadge Baba



In 1925



Gadge Baba

In 1940

**In 1956
the year of
his death**



(except the areas under the jurisdiction of the police of autonomous
' carry those functions as listed in Article 2 Part 2

The house of
Gadge Baba's
maternal uncle
where he
lived in his
childhood



His birth place
at Shengao





Gadge Baba on the move with his bhajan troupe

On a cleaning campaign in
a back street in Bombay



(except the areas under the jurisdiction of the police of autonomous entities), carry out those functions as listed in Article 2, Paragraph 2

Gadge Baba rescuing
a blind man who was
lodged in his
dharmashala

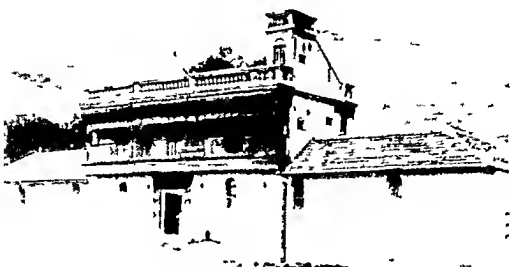


Addressing a congregation at Dombay

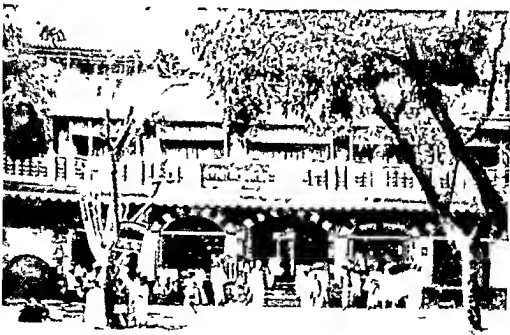




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Chokhamela Dharmashala at Pandharpur constructed in 1917



Maratha Dharmashala at Pandharpur constructed in 1920



Mutu tier dharmashala Nassik which came up in 1930



Dharmfashala as an adjunct to J J Hospital at Bombay

(except the areas under the jurisdiction of the police of autonomous entities), carry out those functions as listed in Article 2, Paragraph 2.





Gadge Baba with Karmaveer Bhaurao Patil on his right and Dr B R Ambedkar on the left

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Gadge Baba's left hand thumb impression attested to his will. The sentence in Marathi reads "My heirs relatives persons who may call themselves my disciples (I have made no disciples) or any one else has no right whatsoever to this property indeed a testimony to his selflessness"

२। मिकळतीवर माझे वारसा, भास, शिष्य म्हणविणारे
(मी कोणास शिष्य केलेच नाहीं) अगर इतर कोणाचाही
शिष्यचेही प्रकाश ह्या संनध नाहीं





A striking portrait

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By the middle of 1956 there was further deterioration in his health. Naik-Nimbalkar and Tapase prevailed on him to take rest for some days and they lodged him in the St. Georges Hospital at Bombay. All through the years he had slept on a worn-out piece of mat with a quilt made of patched rags for a cover. In the hospital he therefore felt most uncomfortable and restless to lie in a bed of soft, cushioned mattresses. Lying on the bed with his eyes closed, he heard the call of the woods and the open blue sky beckoning him and his mind travelled over the far-flung areas of the land he had traversed. Here he felt, as it were, he was chained by the artifices of the civilised life of which he had the least fascination. So one day at an hour past midnight, he got up from his bed and without letting anybody see him he sneaked out of the hospital. When somebody asked him about this, he said joking, 'Bappa ! How big the hospital bill would have mounted? From where can I get so much money? So fearing this I ran away from the hospital'. Then he added a bit seriously, 'In the court of God my case has already come up for hearing. I have, however, got a deferment of date and have been mercifully allowed to live a few days more.'

Out of the hospital, he left Bombay and

(except the areas under the jurisdiction of the police of autonomous entities), carry out those functions as listed in Article 2, Paragraph 2.

Nagarwadi gave him a better feeling and he was ready to move again.

From Nagarwadi he went back to Bombay. In Bombay, the Bandra Police Association invited him for a *kirtan* which he delivered in the premises of the Bandra Police line on November 8, 1956. This was his last *kirtan*, a full account of which is available in a booklet published by the Gadge Maharaj Mission. It is indeed surprising that on the threshold of death, which was only on a month and half ahead, he was full of punch and thrust. With an un-failing eloquence, he expounded his ideas about God and directed his tirades against the social evils like untouchability, economic disparities, racial hatred, casteism, etc. He began as usual with the resounding slogan, 'Gopala ! Gopala ! Devkinandan Gopala', and the words flowed from him like a river in spate.

On November 14, he was in Pandharpur. The news about his illness by now had spread all over Maharashtra. In Pandharpur thousands of his devotees thronged at the *dharma-shala* to see him and he sang *bhajans* to them. On the next day he left Pandharpur for Bombay with a brief halt at Poona for a medical check-up. At Bombay, he was admitted into the St. Georges Hospital. He suffered from pneumonia and diabetic coma. There was a serious break-

down in his health and the life in him was ebbing. He stayed in the hospital for about a week, when hundreds of people came everyday and waited in long queues to see him. He felt sorry that people visiting him disturbed other patients in the hospital, nor could he stop them coming. He was also feeling a bit better, which of course was a deceptive feeling. He left the hospital on November 21, and stayed at some other places in the city.

He knew that the end was coming and he now yearned to go to Nagarwadi, his beautiful haven in the Satpuda mountains where the streams of water leapt down from the rocky cliffs in silver cascades and down in the valley the cattle gazed on the green pastures under the canopy of the blue sky. Indeed a place where he must breathe his last. Once he made his decision nobody could prevent him from carrying it out. On December 7, although his condition was critical he left Bombay for Amravati. At Bombay's Victoria Terminus station, a huge crowd had gathered to see him off. The people shouted his favourite slogan 'Gopala! Gopala! Devakimandan Gopala!' and amidst the din of the shoutings and cheering of the crowd he bade adieu to the city where he had innumerable friends and admirers and had done a good many things with

(except the areas under the jurisdiction of the police of autonomous entities), carry out those functions as listed in Article 2, Paragraph 2.

~~Article 28. There shall be established not more than one To or~~

their help and support. At Amravati, he was examined in the Irvin Hospital and stayed in Mr. Rathod's bungalow for a couple of days. From Amravati, he started for Nagarwadi in his van, but before he could reach it he died in the van on December 20.

It was a death in complete harmony with the life he had lived. Since he left his home at the age 29, he had not made any particular place his home. He felt his soul imprisoned within the four walls of the home. He was a man of the road, eat his food on the road and on the road he ended his life, a fitting finish to the life of a perpetual wanderer. . . .

His dead body was brought back to Amravati and kept in the garden of Mr. Rathod's bungalow for people to pay their last homage to him. The news of his death spread like wildfire and people from all parts of Varhad flew into Amravati. Over three hundred thousand people had assembled to attend his last rites and never in its history the city had witnessed a bigger funeral procession. After the procession had moved in all parts of the city, his body was brought back to Mr. Rathod's garden, where he was cremated on a pile of sandalwood. As the red and crimson flames lept towards the sky, thousands of the mourners broke down and wept bitterly. In his death

they had lost a man who gave them strength to live, courage to face odds and a meaning to their otherwise hopelessly miserable life.

He often used to say that the body belonged to the five elements of nature (the earth, air, water, sky and the sun) and once its use was over had to be returned to the elements. True, his body had returned to the elements, but he remains ensconced in the hearts of the thousands of his countrymen in whose life he brought hope and cheer. The several works he carried out and the institutions he built in his life time will keep his memory alive and green in the minds of the many generations to come.

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TEACHINGS

GADGE DABA had never read a book of printed pages, precisely because he had not learnt to read. But he had read from the book of life more extensively than one could even imagine. The world he kept constantly moving in was for him a book and the vast number of men and women he met with made, as it were, the words in the book of which meaning he grasped fully. He could not have laid any claim to erudition or scholarship, but he meditated long enough, especially in his days of *sadhana*, on the reality of life in its manifold manifestations and had reached certain definite conclusions. By virtue of these meditations he turned a philosopher and a teacher. Like Aristotle, he was a peripatetic philosopher unendingly talking to the people, explaining them his ideas and winning them over to his point of view. And in the latter he invariably succeeded for he was gifted with a magical word power and a very fertile imagery. The method

he employed in his discourses had a Socratic touch for he engaged people in a polemical exercise of questions and answers

The world of Hindu thinking has all along presented a strange, unreconciled contradiction. While the philosophical thought of the ancient and mediaeval thinkers soared dizzy heights of monism and even exhibited strong trends of revolt of atheism as in the Sankhya, Buddhist and Jain schools, the Hindu religious orthodoxy tenaciously persisted to be polytheistic. People have personal gods, many in number, whose outward manifestations again vary from place to place. Even the educated classes of the present day worship a number of gods like Vishnu, Shiv, Ram, Krishna, Ganesh, Shani, Amba, Kali and a host of others. The case of the backward class people, living mostly in the rural and tribal areas, has remained even worse. Their gods seem to be the vestiges of the tribal living which may date back to pre-Vedic period. The temple idols of many gods and goddesses are fierce enough in their appearance. Their eyes stare in the void before them, their tongues hang down to their necks, some of them have even fangs in their teeth and they are seen killing their demon victims lying at their feet by piercing their spears through them. A stone in an odd place could be deified

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if someone would only take the trouble of smearing it with *sindur*. Vetāl, Mhasoba, Khandoba and many others like them are demonic gods who demand from their worshippers animal sacrifices to calm down and cast their favours on them !

It is argued in favour of polytheism, naively of course, that it is indicative of freedom of worship and that it is an outcome of, or leads to, an attitude of tolerance among people. The facts of history do not bear out any such consummation. On the contrary, the fact that every caste and community should have their separate gods, separate rites and separate styles of worship created a distance and disunity among people and gave rise to a plethora of religious sects and creeds. It is to this situation that Dnyaneshwar, Namdeo, Chokhamela, Eknath, Tukaram and several other saints, many of whom significantly enough belonged to the lower castes, addressed themselves with *bhakti* as their ideal. *Bhakti* is piety, love and devotion rolled into one. It precludes violence, hatred and cruelty of any sort and in any form. Ramification of the society into castes and sub-castes leads to exclusiveness and alienation among people and it is violence in a latent form as it inevitably breeds antagonisms. The Hindu orthodoxy however ordained strict adherence

by people to their respective castes, as it stood secure by a ramified society and thrived on it. The *bhakti* cult of the saints was a revolt against orthodoxy and its motto was as saint Ramanand said, 'Let no one ask a man's caste or sect, whoever adores God, he is God's one'

A story is told about Chokhamela, which though pathetic enough, eloquently brings out the significance of *bhakti* ideal. Chokha once entered the temple of Pandharpur, when the temple priests and upper caste worshippers castigated him for having dared to enter the holy place to which entry for the outcasts was barred. Chokha explained that he entered the temple not of his own accord but God himself spurred him on to walk in. He said, 'What availeth birth in high caste, what avail rites or learning if there is no devotion or faith? Though a man be of low caste, yet if he is faithful in heart and loves God, and regards all creatures as though they were like himself, and makes no distinction between his own and other people's children, and speaks the truth, his caste is pure, and God is pleased with him. Never ask a man's caste when he has in his heart faith in God and love of men. God wants in his children love and devotion and he does not care for caste'*

* M. G. Ranade's *Rise of the Maratha Power* — pp. 68

(except the areas under the jurisdiction of the police of autonomous entities), carry out those functions as listed in Article 2, Paragraph 2.

In line with these saints of the past, Gadge Baba is a staunch advocate of *bhakti* ideology in our times. *Bhakti* is a monotheist ideal, which admits of only one God, the Creator and the Sustainer of the Universe. Dnyaneshwar, Namdeo and Tukaram were, however, very fervent in their adoration of god Vithoba in the temple at Pandharpur. They were not, however, as Justice M. G. Ranade points out, idolaters. They saw in god Vithoba the image of the Supreme Being — the incarnation of the Lord of the Universe. What they upheld was image worship and not idolatry. The vital difference between the two must be properly understood. Idolatry is blind worship of a deity in which the awareness of the Supreme Being is totally absent and hence it permeates of any number of deities. In image worship the awareness of the supremacy of One God is always present and god like Vithoba is worshipped in the image of the Supreme Being. The image worship was also a concession the saints made for the mass of the simple-minded people who could not be expected to understand theological intricacies. They were however strong in their protest against elaborate rites in worship performed by priests and maintained that only reciting the name of God or even his remembrance was enough for a

communion with him, this being one of the basic tenets of *bhakti* which aims at elimination of the intermediaries in the approach to God

Gadge Baba drew his inspiration mainly from Tukaram who was his spiritual master and guide. Remarkably, Gadge Baba goes even a step ahead of these teachers of the past. In tune with the spirit of the modern times, he repudiates idol worship in unequivocal terms. He even sounds iconoclastic. These are his words —

Tukoba says, if he who is born a human adores God with a true devotion in his heart, he raises himself to the plane of God. Nay, he himself becomes God. Tukoba cites his own instance —

*"I went in search of God
and truly I found God in me".*

Tukaram says, 'I am a peasant — a son of peasant. How can I therefore know the ways to offer prayers to God? Following the advice of the saints I took to the path of *bhakti*.' And remember Tukaram says he could not see God and he became God himself. If any one imagines that God is like this or like that and craves to see him or meet him, well, he is a naive person suffering from an illusion. Since this earth was born, nobody has seen God and no

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one will ever see him. God is not a thing to be seen. God in the temple, and on the river bank, god here and god there, god at Rameshwar and god at Badrinarayan — this is all commerce of god. Nobody has seen or will see god whom we call the Creator and at whose will the universe goes on.'

Here it will be asked, why did then Gadge Baba go to Pandharpur? The answer is, in going to Pandharpur and other places of pilgrimage his purpose was to help the poor pilgrims and relieve them of their distress as best as he could. He otherwise never lost an opportunity to chastise people for making a mad rush to these so-called holy places to pay homage to their God if they were devoid of any love and sympathy for their brothers groaning under the weight of poverty and social segregation. 'It is sheer idiocy to go to Pandharpur if you have no money on you and have to borrow it from others', he would further tell them. It should be noted that although year after year he visited Pandharpur on Ashadhi and Kartiki fairs, not once did he go to the Vithoba temple and bowed before the idol there. It is again equally noteworthy that he did not raise a single shrine although he could have raised many with the funds which were so readily available to him. He also

denounced fanatic practices like fasts, ablutions, offerings, self-mortifications, rites, ceremonies and pilgrimages as forms and ways of worship. In his characteristic humorous style he once cited this example, 'You offer delicious food dishes to the god in a temple and after you have left a dog comes in and eats the food. Will your god be able to drive the dog away?'

'No'

Then what is the sense in worshipping a god who is so imbecile that he cannot ward off a dog that eats his food and what is the point in wasting your food on a god like this?' The most exemplary trait of his character was that he never compromised on his principles. His honesty and integrity were always beyond doubt.

For Gadge Baba, non-violence was an article of faith on which there could be no second thoughts, as it was with Mahatma Gandhi. Considering that Gadge Baba had started educating people on this score prior to 1910, it can be said that in a way he anticipated Gandhi. From his cow-boy days he had nurtured in him a feeling of endearment and love for the animal world and any idea of killing animals for selfish ends was most repugnant to him. Following an age-old practice, the rural people and especially the tribals sought the blessings

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of their deities by slaughtering animals before them. The abodes of these deities were often in remote and out-of-the-way places in mountains where the worshippers gathered in some sort of secrecy for the sacrificial ceremony. Gadge Baba's men were spread all over the land and someone would bring him the news of such a ceremony taking place at some such place. He would immediately proceed to that place and address the people in his usual fervent manner. He made them see the folly in such sacrifices and appealed to them to desist from the cruel act. Most often he succeeded in persuading people to give up the slaughter. Thanks to his whirlwind campaigns, Gadge Baba created a strong public feeling against animal sacrifices and the government taking notice of it banned it legally.

The core of his teachings is that service to the poor and the infirm is service to God. Tukaram says —

He who says —

*'The afflicted and the oppressed
Are mine'*

In him find the true sage

And know God resides in him

In advocating this view, Gadge Baba offered a simple and yet convincing logic. If everything we see and know in this world is God's

creation, it follows all men are his creatures and they cannot but be equal. If they were not then God cannot be said to be just and impartial. But as the saints and prophets are never tired of telling us, love, justice and equity are the very attributes of God. The inequalities and disparities we see in society cannot therefore be by God's design. The rich and the poor, the high and the low, are evidently man made distinctions. Poverty which brings numerous other ills in its train has been the lot of the major part of mankind in all ages. But for this the greed, avarice and lust of a small minority is responsible, and this minority has either by an accident of history or by its manoeuvrings has managed to keep itself at the helm of society and wield all power. But it detracts from God's justice and fairplay and is a serious infringement in the order of things as He willed it. The rich belonging to the class of priests, traders and merchants eat so much that they get a nausea of food, while those who toil and break their backs to produce food have to be content with a few crumbs and may even starve. Where is justice in this? asks Gadge Baba. So to serve God you must set aright this disturbed order of things. It means helping the poor to get out of the abyss of poverty they have fallen in. We

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Shrimati Sharada Amembai, a social worker and a devout follower of Gadge Baba undertook to write biography of Baba, but could not complete due to her sudden death in the year 1957

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help our friends as by duty. But we help a friend who is in difficulty and there does not arise a question of helping a friend who is well-off and does not need help. On this analogy, it is the poor who are in need of help and succour. The rich and the well-to-do, who do not need any help and can help themselves, must be made to sacrifice for the poor and the needy. If however the poor remain poor, it means the order of nature as God willed it continues to remain in a state of constant disrepair. To help the poor is therefore rendering service to God and there is no worship holier and no cause nobler than this, for it is setting in order the house God has given us.

Gadge Baba was no doubt a philosopher and his was a naturalist philosophy. According to him, nature is the sole arbiter of our destinies. For solutions to our problems, we must therefore refer them to nature. The fundamental reality of our natural existence is that we are born equal. The economic inequalities and social distinctions are of our own making and they assume their most heinous form in untouchability. By these inequalities and distinctions we have disturbed the equilibrium of nature, which is the root cause of all our sufferings. The law of nature demands that equality among men be restored, otherwise the human

race must march towards its doom Gadge Baba was thus a humanist and a socialist Atre has said, "The Communists and Socialists think that they were the first to give the message of equality to the Indian people and that they are its votaries today Gadge Baba does not know whether Marx was a man or an ape But for the last fifty years he has been teaching pure and simple Marxism to the ignorant masses through his *kirtans* and through the example of his own life Gadge Baba is a veritable platform of socialism in Maharashtra and indeed an enormous one

Gadge Baba was again most emphatic in his denunciation of the drinking habit, not because of any ideas of austerity but because it wrought devastation into the life of the poor people He had seen how addiction to drinking by men utterly ruined their families both materially and morally and he had learnt this unsavoury truth from the tragic end his father had met Through his *kirtans* he exposed the various physical, social and economic evils resulting from the drinking vice in a simple language intelligible to the rural people It is claimed by the men who worked with him that the number of addicts he converted to sobriety would have to be counted in several thousands, while no statistical figure could be given of

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those whom he saved from falling victims to drinking, but surely they must be many millions

Gadge Baba was not a man to be contented with mere telling his ideas to people. He practised what he preached. His heart overflowed with compassion for the poor and the physically incapacitated people, for he had witnessed numerous tragedies of them and gone himself through the agonising experience. Whenever he came across destitute persons on the road, who were blind, deaf, dumb or lame, he picked them and lodged them in the homes he had built for them and his *dharmashalas* for care. Dandekar narrates an incident when Gadge Baba gave bath to a leper and washed clean his festering sores to the dismay of many people around him. It was again his regular practice to give mass dinners to the disabled and infirm people on festival days such as Diwali. On such occasions, he would go from grocer to grocer, and from one vendor to another and collect all the provisions. No shopkeeper grudged to part with his goods, on the contrary they were most willing to help the great Baba. For cooking he employed his army of workers and the food included special festival sweet delicacies like *glebis*, *ladus* and *karanjis*. A grand banquet was held in which

hundreds of such hapless people participated. They were treated as most distinguished guests and had only to come and take their seats in the big pandal erected for the purpose. The host Gadge Baba personally supervised all the arrangements of the banquet. He also acted as a server and saw that everybody eat well. He took particular delight in feeding people who were underfed and starved.

It is interesting to note that once Kher made a mention to Gandhiji of Gadge Baba and the work he was doing for the poor. For Gandhiji, this was a surprise and he expressed a desire to meet this man of the masses. But Kher thought it rather difficult to ask Gadge Baba to go and see the Mahatma, for he rarely went on his own to meet big people. Sometime after this, Gadge Baba was in Wairdha very near to Gandhiji's ashram at Sevagram. People in hundreds flocked to hear Gadge Baba and there was a huge congregation outside the Sevagram ashram. Gandhiji was much impressed by this sight and he invited Gadge Baba to the ashram. When Gadge Baba came Gandhiji offered him a seat, but he preferred to sit on the ground. Gandhiji made enquiries with Gadge Baba of the *dhatmashalas* he built and other activities he was carrying on for the welfare of the untouchables. On Gandhiji's re-

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quest Gadge Baba also delivered a *kirtan* before the inmates of the Ashram. Gadge Baba had the highest regard for the Mahatma. In his last *kirtan* at Bandra he had said that the moral force Gandhi commanded was so great that the mightiest empire in the history of mankind crumbled before it. He described Gandhi's martyrdom as the highest sacrifice any man had ever done for his people and his country.

It was indeed a memorable occasion. Here were the two apostles of non-violence, who had dedicated every breath of their life for the well-being of the humanity. They were so alike each other, both in their exterior and in their mental make-up. It was a sight, as they say, for the gods and the angels to see.

Appendix I

SHREE GADGE MAHARAJ MISSION

Gadge Baba was no less a man of action than a visionary. He set up a number of institutions and handed them over to the Gadge Maharaj Mission for management. The Mission was established by Gadge Baba on February 8, 1952 for regulating and supervising the affairs of all the registered trusts set up by him. Today, the Mission with a band of self-less workers runs a number of institutions. It spends over Rs. 10 lakhs annually over the management of these institutions. The government of Maharashtra gives an annual grant of Rs 7 lakhs to the Mission on this account. The following is the list of institutions run by the Mission :

ASHRAM SCHOOLS FOR ADIVASI BOYS AND GIRLS

*Total number
of inmates
including
day-scholars*

Shri Gadge Maharaj

Adivasi Ashram School, Rahuri (Ahmadnagar)	..	150
Adivasi Ashram School, Otur (Pune)	..	440
Adivasi Ashram School, Bhiwadi-Vajreshwari (Thane)	..	145

(except the areas under the jurisdiction of the police of autonomous entities), carry out those functions as listed in Article 2, Paragraph 2

	Total number of inmates including day scholars
Adivasi Ashram School Chalwatwad (Thane)	142
Adivasi Ashram School Bhatsai Vasind (Thane)	147
Adivasi Ashram School Nagarwadi (Amravati)	125
Adivasi Ashram School Umr (Yavatmal)	300
Adivasi Ashram School Sitakhandi (Nanded)	140

For Vimi kta Jatis and Nomadic Tribes —

Boys and Girls

Shree Gadge Maharaj Vimochit Jati Ashram School Gondavle Bk (Satara)	151
Shree Gadge Maharaj Vimochit Jati Ashram School Murum Circle (Satara)	75
Shree Gadge Maharaj Nomadic Tribes Ashram School Brahmapuri (Satara)	140

Hostels for Boys

Shree Gadge Maharaj Vidyarthi Vasatigriha Rahur (Ahmadnagar)	60
Shree Gadge Maharaj Vidyarthi Vasatigriha Gondavle Bk (Satara)	100
Shree Gadge Maharaj Vidyarthi Vasatigriha Bhusawal (Jalgaon)	84
Shree Gadge Maharaj Vidyarthi Vasatigriha Ghausala (Beed)	60
Shree Gadge Maharaj Vidyarthi Vasatigriha Satara (Satara)	60
Shree Gadge Maharaj Vidyarthi Vasatigriha, Kurla (Bombay)	100
Shree Gadge Maharaj Vidyarthi Vasatigriha Otur (Pune)	72
Shree Gadge Maharaj Vidyarthi Vasatigriha Otur (Pune)	48

	Total number of inmates including day-scholars
Shree Gadge Maharaj Vidyarthi Vasatigriha, Rajuri (Pune)	24
Shree Gadge Maharaj Vidyarthi Vasatigriha, Junnar (Pune)	50
Shree Gadge Maharaj Vidyarthi Vasatigriha, Brahmapuri (Satara)	25

Hostels for Girls

Shree Gadge Maharaj Kanya Chhatralaya Pandharpur (Solapur)	80
Shree Gadge Maharaj Kanya Chhatralaya, Otur (Pune)	30
Shree Gadge Maharaj Kanya Chhatralaya, Junnar (Pune)	30
Shree Gadge Maharaj Kanya Chhatralaya, Mira (Singli)	40

High Schools and Post Basic Ashram Schools

Shree Gadge Maharaj Vidyalyaya, Kurla (Bombay) ..	340
Matoshri Sakhubai Kanya Shala, Pandharpur (Solapur)	250
Shree Gadge Maharaj Vidyalyaya, Otur . . .	510
Shree Gadge Maharaj Post-Basic Ashram School, Bhidwadi Vajreshwari (Thane)	60
Shree Gadge Maharaj Post Basic Ashram School, Bhatkal-Vasind (Thane)	80
Shree Gadge Maharaj Post-Basic Ashram School, Chalawadi (Thane)	60
Shree Gadge Maharaj Post Basic Ashram School, Rahuri (Ahmadnagar)	90
Shree Gadge Maharaj Post Basic Ashram School, Otur (Pune)	100

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	Total number of inmates including day-scholars
Shree Gadge Maharaj Post-Basic Ashram School, Umri (Yavatmal)	100
Shree Gadge Maharaj Post-Basic Ashram School, Nagurwadi (Amravati)	70
Shree Gadge Maharaj Post-Basic Ashram School, Sitakhandi (Nanded)	88
Shree Gadge Maharaj Post-Basic Ashram School, Gondavle Bk (Satara)	80
Shree Gadge Maharaj Post-Basic Ashram School, Brahmapuri (Satara)	60

Vridhashram

Shree Gadge Baba Paramdham Vridhashram, Wal- gaon (Amravati)	80
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Sanskar Kendras

Shree Gadge Maharaj Sanskar Kendra, Otur (Pune)	60
Shree Gadge Maharaj Chaitanya Balak Mandir, Rajuri (Pune)	60
Shree Gadge Maharaj Balwadi Otur (Pune)	45

THE MISSION ALSO RUNS :

	Year of establishment
Dharmashala at Runamochan ..	1914
Chokhamela Dharmashala at Pandharpur ..	1917
Maratha Dharmashala at Pandharpur ..	1920
Blind and Disabled Sadavarta at Pandharpur ..	1921
Parit Dharmashala at Pandharpur ..	1925
Nashik Dharmashala	1930
Aalandi Dharmashala	1930

Aalandi Parit Dharmashala	1930
Dehu Dharmashala	1930
Blind and Disabled Sadavarta at Nasik ..	1932
Aakul Dharmashala at Pune	1940
Parit Dharmashala at Trambakeshwar ..	1940
Kalthiwale Dharmashala at Trambakeshwar ..	1948
Shree Gadge Maharaj Mission	1952
Gorakshan Sanstha at Nagarwadi	1952
Shree Gadge Maharaj Gorakshan at Rahuri ..	1953
J J Hospital Dharmashala at Bombay ..	1954
Shri Gadge Baba Prakashan Samiti	1925

Appendix II

IMPORTANT EVENTS IN GADGE BABA'S LIFE

Wednesday, February 23, 1876

Debuji's birth at Shenggaon in Amravati district.

1884

Father Zingraji's death at Kotegaon.
Mother Saklubai with young Debu goes to live at her father's house at Dapure.

1892

Debuji's marriage with Dhanaji Parit's daughter Kunta.

(except the areas under the jurisdiction of the police of autonomous entities), carry out those functions as listed in Article 2, Paragraph 2.

1899

Birth of the first daughter, Aloka, at Dapure.

1900

Birth of the second daughter, Kalavati at Dapure.

1902

Birth of the son, Mudgal.

February 1, 1904

Meeting with the sage and revelation.

1905

Renunciation of home and family. Birth of the fourth child, son Govinda.

1906

Sets up Gorakshan Sanstha at Murtijapur (Cow-protection Scheme).

1907

In the fair at Runmochan, begins *bhajan* programmes.

1908

The work of construction of the first *ghat* on the river Purna completed.

1914

Builds *dharmashala* for Parit community at Runmochan.

1917

Chokhamela *dharmashala* at Pundharpur.

1919

Marriage of son, Govinda, at Worli, Bombay.

1920

Maratha *dharmashala* at Pundharpur.

1921

Home for the blind and other disabled persons at Pandharpur.

May 1, 1923

Death of mother, Sakhubai.

May 5, 1923

Death of son, Govinda.

1925

Parit *dharmashala* at Pundharpur.

1930

Sets up Dharmashala Trust at Nasik.

Alandi Dharmashala Trust.

Parit *dharmashala* at Alandi.

Dharmashala at Dehu.

Campaign for prevention of animal sacrifices.

1932

Home for the blind and other disabled persons at Nasik.

1937

Animal sacrifices stopped at Donad. Construction of two *ghats* on the river Katepurna.

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1940

Dharmashala at Akul, Poona.

Parit *dharmashala* at Trimbakeshwar.

1948

Kalaiwala *dharmashala* at Trimbakeshwar.

1952

Establishment of Gadge Maharaj Mission
at Bombay, Cattleshed at Nagarwadi.

1953

Cattleshed at Rahuri.

1954

Dharmashala as an adjunct to J. J. Hos-
pital at Bombay.

Ashramshala at Rahuri.

December 20, 1956

Death at Valgaon on way to Nagarwadi.

December 21, 1956

Cremation at Amravati.

**For any information about Gadge
Baba institutions please contact :**

Shree Gadge Maharaj Mission

**6, Vidyarthi Bhuvan, Tribhuvan Road,
Bombay 400 004**

Tel: 352989